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## **Academic perceptions of higher education assessment processes in neoliberal academia**

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### **Abstract**

Neoliberal higher education reforms in relation to quality assurance, managerialist practices, accountability and performativity are receiving increasing attention and criticism. In this article, I will address student assessment as part of the technologies that increasingly govern academics and their work in universities. I will draw on Foucault's theories of governmentality and subjectification, and discourse analysis that have framed the research conducted with 16 academics in one university in the United Kingdom. While academics in the study expressed frustration with neoliberal reforms in general, and assessment policies in particular, they tended not to demonstrate overt resistance within their university systems. The reasons for this will be questioned and analysed in relation to a neoliberal mode of government where power relations shaping academic subjectivities are diffuse and pervasive. I will discuss the ways in which academics understand and act within these power relations, and I will also demonstrate a variety of covert practices that academics tend to apply when coping with the neoliberal technologies of government such as assessment.

### **Keywords**

Higher education, academic work, assessment, governmentality, neoliberalism, resistance, Foucault

### **Introduction: a neoliberal mode of government in higher education**

Higher education institutions exist in the context of a 'political arena' where accountability and market-driven demands have become fundamental organising principles (Jankowski & Provezis, 2012, p. 1). As part of the changing culture and ethos of higher education (Harris, 2005), today's universities are increasingly emphasising strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance and academic audits when organising educational processes

and academic work (Olssen & Peters, 2005). This introduction of market principles into education is part of what has been termed neoliberalism. Guided by Foucault's work on biopolitics (2004), my article approaches neoliberalism as a historically specific mode of government that is rooted in economic discourses of competition. This is a mode of government that on the one hand, believes in free choice and the primacy of the market, and on the other, enforces increasing scrutiny in order to facilitate institutional success in competitive relations. Since neoliberalism is what pre-eminently characterises late-capitalism (Bansel, 2014), the neoliberal educational reforms can be seen as being rooted in Western public policy contexts of the 1980s, the governments of Thatcher and Reagan in particular, that popularised political thoughts dominated by neoliberal market orientation, globalisation, free trade and the reduction of governmental and welfare systems (Peters, 2012).

Within this neoliberal context, universities like other public organisations are pressured to change. Allen (2011) argues that universities are pressured to become entrepreneurial in order to ensure their competitiveness in a higher education market. It is therefore unsurprising that universities are paying increasing attention to technologies of government by developing procedures related to institutional performance indicators (Jankowski & Provezis, 2012), quasi-market management and auditing and monitoring models (Meyer, 2012). As neoliberalism has affected the context in which universities function and academics work, Clegg and Smith (2010) note also that educational processes such as teaching, learning and assessment are increasingly shaped and regulated via centrally set institutional strategies and managerialist practices. Gipps (1999) argues that driving forces imposing control over teaching practices are essentially economic. Under the economic rationality, students can be seen as customers and universities as highly competitive service providers who need to ensure that their high quality services are clearly communicated to and trusted by the present and potential customers (Jankowski & Provezis, 2012). Especially as public trust in excellence of academic qualifications might help to protect and enhance institutional reputation and rankings, which in turn could attract even more potential students (Sadler, 2011). Therefore, a detailed and prescribed assessment system might promote transparency of educational processes, at the same time creating a more formalised relationship between students and staff in which both are aware of their rights

and responsibilities. From another angle but perhaps still related to neoliberal changes in higher education, Evans (2011, p. 219) argues that increasingly detailed assessment policies might be a response to the 'casualisation of the academic workforce': a rising number of hourly paid academics working in universities may find detailed regulations helpful. Evans' argument might be well characteristic to the UK universities where zero-hours contracts are progressively replacing full-time academic positions, and it is therefore unsurprising that the regulations that now serve diverse academic populations have become more detailed and prescriptive. However, this pervasive institutional concern with market position, both in terms of reputation and changing employment relations, tends to demonstrate the dual and often contradictory nature of the neoliberal mode of government, that is in order to facilitate free market ethos, customer choice and so called flexible academic employment, universities develop highly bureaucratic and prescriptive policy regimes, such as the assessment system analysed in this paper. The scrutinisation of educational processes, though, has brought into question the traditional understanding of academic expertise and autonomy (Harris, 2005). In many UK universities, student assessment can be viewed as part of a neoliberal policy context that attempts to influence not just academic practice but academic performance. From a Foucauldian perspective in particular, it is expected that neoliberal policy contexts shape the subjectivity of academics and students via such things as the codification of assessment policy and practices.

In this article, I will draw on the findings of my doctoral research project that involves analysis of assessment policies, interviews and focus groups with academics, experts, and students across four disciplinary areas: Arts (A), Social Sciences (Soc Sci), Science and Engineering (Sci E), and Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences (MVLS). I will highlight the key results of the interviews and focus groups conducted with 16 full-time academics in one UK university during the academic year 2013/2014. In doing so, I seek to understand the ways in which academics negotiate assessment policy and practice within a neoliberal higher education context.

### **Theorising assessment technologies: Foucault on subjectification and governmentality**

The theoretical underpinning for this study is that of subjectification, guided by Foucault's theorisation (Foucault, 1982). Subjectification as 'the process of becoming a subject within a discursive power/knowledge production' tends to be a never-ending process in which subject positions are created, negotiated, accepted and transformed both in and through everyday discursive practices (Lehn-Christiansen, 2011, p. 312). For Foucault (1982, p. 345) power relations shaping the subjectivities exist in complex relations: 'in the whole network of social'. He argues that societal life is already built in a way in which some can act on others; however, he also emphasises that power can be acted only on free subjects: subjects who have a variety of ways to respond and behave (Foucault, 1982). This also means that power and freedom/resistance exist in a contradictory but a fundamental relationship. Foucault's perspective on subjectivity and subjectification has become a widely applied framework for understanding subject formation in relation to a dominant mode of government such as neoliberalism. By following a Foucauldian theorisation, the concept of the academic as 'a subject' in this article will refer firstly to the individual as being 'a subject to someone else by control and dependence', and secondly, as being tied to '[their] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge' (Foucault, 1982, p. 331). This duality in subject formation and power relations seems to be reflected in but also reinforced by two types of techniques: the techniques of domination and the techniques of the self (Foucault, 1997). While such aspects of the former techniques are recognisable in the restrictive policy contexts, the latter form receives particular attention in this article since, according to Foucault (2004), the idea of freedom is a key condition for the formation of a neoliberal subjectivity of *homo economicus*. Hamann (2009, p. 37) argues in line with Foucault that *homo economicus* is 'a historically specific form of subjectivity constituted as a free and autonomous "atom" of self-interest'. I do not wish to argue that academics are becoming neoliberal subjects of *homo economicus*, it might be too radical an assumption in a context where academic practices such as assessment are increasingly regulated and prescribed. However, I believe it would be vital to explore if this freedom that makes individuals increasingly accept neoliberal reforms and to act as '(their) own capital' (Hamann, 2009, p. 53), 'a potential wealth creator' as Bansel (2014, p. 8) explained it, also includes a potential for freedom to resist and act according to their own 'practices of the self' (Foucault, 1984, p. 282). This is especially evident from the perspective of Foucault's theory of governmentality where power that shapes subjectivities is diffuse and constantly balancing between

maximum and minimum, and rather minimum than maximum (Foucault, 2004). While the power relations are widespread and fluid in human relationships, especially in neoliberal contexts, the practices of freedom cannot only mean liberation from domination but based on Foucault's argumentation (1984), I presume that these practices can exist in a variety of forms, which I aim to trace with assistance of empirical data.

Foucault's work on governmentality and subjectification provides a nuanced understanding of the ways in which subjectivity in neoliberal academia is shaped and formed in relation to neoliberal technologies of government such as assessment. For Foucault (1978) the purpose of government is not in the act of government itself, but rather in increasing the welfare of the population, its conditions, wealth, health and longevity; this also means ensuring governable subjects. I agree with Bansel (2014, p. 4) who argues that governmentality is time and context specific by including 'historically specific relations of power, practices of subjectification and technologies through which the "conduct of conduct" is regulated'. Therefore, the governmentality as it is present in the contemporary university contexts can be explained as including a variety of specific institutional practices and technologies that 'frame, regulate and optimise academic life' (Morrissey, 2013, p. 799). I would argue that one of these technologies can be also student assessment that acts on and through academic work. While being situated in competing pedagogical discourses of empowering and supporting students, as it is evident in recent scholarly work on assessment, assessment can function as a technology of government in neoliberal university contexts. An increasingly regulated assessment system might facilitate market competition, institutional reputation and zero-hours academic contracts as argued earlier in this paper; however, this prescribed system might also help to oversee and control (academic) populations and act on their subjectivity. This also means that even if assessment itself is not formally part of the technologies of government, the way it is used becomes part of neoliberal governmentality and its structure (Jankowski & Provezis, 2012). Interestingly, the shaping of assessment purposes in response to prevailing political or economic reforms is not new. For example, Delandshere (2001, p. 121) highlights the way in which 'assessment practices implicitly endorse society's dominant ideologies'; and Gipps (1999) and Madaus and O'Dwyer (1999) illustrate how the examinations as a policy mechanism were first introduced in China under the Han dynasty (206BC to AD 220) with an aim to select suitable candidates for

governmental services by high-stake testing. By tracing the changes throughout the history, Madaus and O'Dwyer (1999, p. 692) also argue that with the emergence of industrial capitalism assessment practices in universities and schools became influenced by the concepts of 'standardisation, uniformity, precision, clarity, quantification and rational tactics'. As such, it is unsurprising that the functions and organisation of assessment practices should alter in the light of a neoliberal mode of government.

As regards the power relations accompanying assessment, I acknowledge that assessment processes are underpinned by a fundamental element of domination between assessor and assessed. This might make assessment as a technology of government especially distinctive. Guided by Foucault (1984, p. 299), assessment in higher education could be interpreted as an attempt to render students subject to 'the arbitrary and unnecessary authority of a teacher'. Within such a system where domination is prevalent, assessment becomes one area where power issues are particularly evident (Taras, 2008). Foucault (1975, p. 182) explains these processes of domination and discipline by defining the examination as 'a normalising glaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish'. From this perspective, assessment renders each student 'a describable and analysable object' while also distributing them normatively in a given population (Foucault, 1975, p. 190). Following this reading, assessment transforms students from unruly bodies into docile subjects (Patton, 2012); however, based on Foucault's work on governmentality, I also aim to emphasise that assessment as a technology of government tends to include more diffused and complex power relations than just this relationship of domination. Assessment technologies in highly bureaucratic policy contexts tend to monitor and evaluate the performances of academics who design and undertake the assessment, and thereby assessment might influence the subjectivities of not only students but also of academics. While recognising the power imbalances and modes of domination, I do not argue for complete academic autonomy in assessment, but I acknowledge that policy developments and regulations might help to transform power imbalances that currently exist in favour of the assessor over the assessed, and maybe to support the work of hourly paid academic staff. Yet I believe that the exploration of academics' experiences of assessment, the ways in which they interpret, enact, modify and resist the dominant policy discourses of assessment, it would provide insight into the processes of subjectification via assessment technologies

but also into academics' 'practices of freedom' (Foucault, 1984). I am interested in the diverse forms of practices of freedom that academics express in the context of an increasingly dominant neoliberal higher education system where a variety of technologies aim to shape academic work and academic subjectivities.

### **Discourse and discourse analysis**

The key focus of the empirical aspects of this research are the discourses of the interviewed academics that enable us to understand the assessment policy and processes as they are experienced and acted by the interviewees. From a Foucauldian perspective, discourse is 'a space of positions and of differentiated functioning for the subjects' (Foucault, 1972, p. 232). This means that Foucault explains discourse as a system of representation (Hall, 2001), and he uses discourse to refer to taken-for-granted rules that influence what it is possible to think, speak and do at a particular time of history (Walshaw, 2007). While discourse organises the dominant mode of government such as neoliberalism with its technologies of government and subjectivities, Graham (2011) argues that a Foucauldian approach to discourse is an example of the postmodern concern with how language not only produces meaning but also particular subjects. It also means that discourse not only makes struggles or dominations visible, but is the 'thing for which and by which there is struggle' (Foucault, 1970, p. 52-53).

Similarly to many authors (Diaz-Bone et al, 2008; Graham, 2005), I agree that Foucauldian discourse analysis has a specific concern with power, practice and subjectivity; however, I also agree that Foucauldian discourse analysis as a method tends not to be an integrated field. For this reason, I have combined Foucault's conceptual ideas on discourse with Fairclough's practical tools of analysis. Even if Fairclough's methodological perspective has a stronger focus on linguistic analysis, the key understanding of discourse as a form of social practice, which constructs and constitutes social entities, relations and subjects (Fairclough, 1992) tends to be underpinned by a Foucauldian understanding. Fairclough's critical discourse analysis tends to be a dialectical method, making it possible to explore the relations between discourse and other elements of social practices such as subjects, values



and instruments (Fairclough, 2001a). Also, Fairclough's approach is underpinned by an assumption that the new discourses, i.e. the discourses of neoliberalism, can meet resistance in institutions which result in them being partly, if at all, enacted or inculcated by the subjects (Fairclough, 2001a). By engaging with both Foucault's and Fairclough's perspectives on discourse analysis, it might provide a more nuanced understanding of the academics' perceptions of assessment technologies, diffuseness of power relations but especially of the diverse forms of resistance that might be possible to express in academia. By following Fairclough's (1992, 1993, 2001b) three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, each discursive artefact was analysed in a spreadsheet format as:

- a) a text by describing its vocabulary, metaphors, grammar, textual structures
- b) a discursive practice by interpreting the situational context of text production and intertextual discourses
- c) a social practice by explaining the social determinants influencing the discourse, key statements and possible effects of the statements

By breaking down the discourse artefacts into different categories and analysing the connections between these categories, the analysis provided a more nuanced way to explore the Foucauldian concept of subjectification and the practices of freedom as they are experienced in neoliberal university contexts. For example, the linguistic aspects such as vocabulary, grammar and metaphors often reflected the frustration that academics experience in relation to neoliberal reforms but also their rather hidden ways of responding to and reacting against the reforms; this means that linguistic focus became a resource for the author when tracing the Foucauldian processes.

The discourse artefacts analysed as part of this research were created by interviewing 10 academics and by conducting 2 focus groups with academics from a research-led Russell Group university in the UK. The Russell Group label refers to 24 universities in the UK that are considered to have a leading position in research, teaching, provision of learning opportunities and links with private and public sector (Russell Group, 2015). This particular university has about 25 000 students studying at the undergraduate and the postgraduate levels and about 6000 staff members, including 2000 active researchers. The sample was based on the principles of purposive sampling and included full-time academic staff from

different disciplinary areas (Arts, Social Sciences, Science and Engineering, and Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences), with different working experience (from 1 year to 20 years) and academic rank (lecturers, university teachers, senior lecturers, professors). The invitation to individual interviews was sent via email to 18 academics, from which 10 academics agreed to take part of this research. Focus group participants were self-recruited via staff mailing list. The study was approved by the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, and the research participants were aware of their voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity from the very beginning of the study. They were given an opportunity to revisit the interview transcripts and to remove any quotes they would not like to be presented as part of this research. To maintain anonymity, the quotes presented in this paper have been de-identified, and the codes UT, L, SL and P refer to academic titles of university teacher, lecturer, senior lecturer and professor. The codes also include a reference to a disciplinary area and the length of working experience in higher education.

### **Experiences of assessment as a technology of government**

Let me start by demonstrating the ways metaphoric phrases became helpful when tracing the academics' experiences of student assessment as a possible technology of government. By drawing attention to the use of metaphors, for instance, the metaphoric phrases provided an initial insight into the academics' experiences of a rather prescriptive assessment regime, but they also pointed out possible areas for deeper analysis in relation to Foucauldian perspective to the technologies of government and subjectification.

The main institutional assessment regulation in the University is the *Code of Assessment*, and the interviewed academics tended to describe it as 'a complicated document' (SL1, A, 16 years), 'difficult to digest' (L2, A, 6 years), and difficult 'to get the head around' (UT2, Soc Sci, 1 year). The *Code of Assessment* is a document that codifies assessment regulations and practices in the University, yet, it is experienced as being so complex that academic staff struggle to follow the regulations and see assessment as something mysterious like 'a lottery' (UT4, Soc Sci, 16 years), 'a big magic box' (UT1, Soc Sci, 1 year) or 'a necessary evil' (UT2, Soc Sci, 14 years). Within this highly metaphoric context, a more specific example of

the confusion around the assessment regulations and policy development was provided by Lecturer 2 who highlighted the importance of the guidance document to the assessment regulations that has been developed and distributed by the Senate office:

The fact that there is also a guide to *the Code of Assessment*, [laughing], I mean, I read that, I find it useful, and I'm glad that there is one but the fact that there has to be a guide it indicates that it isn't self explanatory, and it does need interpretation what the actual implications of that are in kind of specific circumstances. (L2, A, 6 years)

These prevailing meanings around confusion and unhappiness with a prescriptive assessment regime might reflect tensions that academics experience when being responsible for following the regulations but at the same time struggling to understand them. Especially as assessment regulations in neoliberal universities tend to apply a particular type of discourse that often silences educational processes of teaching and learning (Evans, 2011), while reflecting the perspective of policymakers rather than the standpoint of those implementing the policies (Geven & Attard, 2012). This means that 'the conduct of the action' is directed from above (Evans, 2011, p. 218) while causing a situation in which academics are increasingly feeling pressurised by the regulatory context and thereby being unhappy with assessment policies and regulations that shape their practices. Also, as the metaphors were used significantly throughout the interviews, they tend to demonstrate academics' way of expressing their confusion and frustration with policy context. By using metaphors, the academics' critique of assessment policies appear in a more neutral, impersonal and safer form. Metaphors therefore became a gateway for understanding the ways academics tend to experience but also to respond to the policy discourses of assessment.

Interestingly, these issues with understanding assessment policies tend to reflect the participants' wider frustration with the neoliberalisation of universities, with 'entrepreneurial university' as Allen (2011) calls it. The phrases such as 'higher education is in transition' (UT1, Soc Sci, 1 year), 'it's lost in all sort of pressures' (L1, A, 9 years), 'a subject to hidden agendas' (UT2, Soc Sci, 14 years), and 'it's part of that factory line commoditisation' (L3, Soc Sci, 3 years) clearly contain an emotional element, and they reflect the participants' experience of higher education reforms that according to some of the

participants turn their workplaces into 'factories' (UT3, MVLS, 7 years) where managerialist practices are applied as new type of 'rituals' (UT4, Soc Sci, 16 years). By metaphorically explaining and critiquing their experience of working in a highly pressurised university, academics tended to share their increasing concerns with neoliberal organisation of higher education and academic work. Senior Lecturer 2 explained it further by arguing that the educational processes in neoliberal higher education contexts are hindered by the market-oriented activities:

I think that the majority of higher education stuff that happens is not to do with actual education of our students, so it's to do with the recruitment, it is to do with marketing, it's to do with regulations, it's to do with rules, it's to do with research, it's to do with giving money in, it's to do with everything, it's to do with building, buildings, whatever. (SL2, Sci E, 20 years)

These discourses reveal that the main concern of the interviewed academics seems to be related to the changing aims of higher education that they see taking place in every aspect of the university, including student assessment. Already twenty years ago Boland (1995) argued that the traditional beliefs in science and teaching as the core aims of higher education become problematic in neoliberal universities. Even if science and teaching have not disappeared from contemporary universities, these traditional processes are now often shaped by economic and market-oriented aspirations – competition as Foucault (2004) argues when highlighting the key essence of neoliberal shift in the mode of government. Interestingly, the quote above by Senior Lecturer 2 tends to also illustrate a variety of technologies that are used to govern contemporary universities - marketing activities, regulations, research outputs, estate development - that all aim to increase the competitiveness and market share of the universities. Within this highly competitive and performance oriented environment, the authenticity of academic practice could be seen to be sacrificed in a desire for performativity (Ball, 2000) in which not science and teaching but competition and self-interest regarding research excellence, research funding, innovative practices and student satisfaction become the ways for the survival of the entrepreneurial universities but perhaps also for the survival in the entrepreneurial universities. As neoliberalism tends to characterize human society being just 'a series of market relations between self-interested subjects' (Olssen, 2005, p. 380-381), it could be also expected that

the aspects of competition and self-interest will turn into the fundamental organising principles of universities.

The changing focus from the pedagogical processes of teaching and assessment to the complex technologies of government was explained by Lecturer 3 (Soc Sci, 3 years) who spoke about the increasing administrative processes that control assessment practices and make assessment difficult to develop and change. Lecturer 3 provided a personal example of developing assessment approaches while on a long train journey:

If I want to change some aspects of my course, I can do that relatively easy, but if I want to change assessment, not only I have got to go through PIPS [Programme Information Process System] and kind of, all of that scrutiny which I think is really bizarre because I just made it up on a train and now it is with me all my life. And I'm like, why is it, that I am suddenly tied to something that I literally made up. (L3, Soc Sci, 3 years)

The Programme Information Process (PIP) applied in this and many other universities makes it possible to centralise course information and to integrate it into a broader system of quality assurance. This sense of scrutiny seems to make academics feel being tied to something that is used not only for educational purposes but also for wider neoliberal technologies of government such as auditing, monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms. It therefore looks as though the initial metaphoric phrases that reflected confusion with assessment policies and unhappiness with neoliberal reforms in higher education, reveal wider processes in relation to student assessment turning into a technology of government that functions as part of the neoliberal policy context and that increasingly scrutinises academics and their work for the sake of institutional market position.

### **Subjectification processes via assessment technologies**

While the discourses of the interviewed academics revealed 'the introduction of economy into political practice', as described by Foucault (1978, p. 207) when speaking about the concepts of neoliberalism and governmentality, the participants' experiences of assessment technologies tended to also provide an insight into the more specific processes of subjectification that are shaped by complex and diffused power relations in contemporary university contexts. As this new mode of government tends to employ the idea of self-

control (Roth, 1992), this diffuseness of power becomes especially evident. According to Davies and Bansel (2010, p. 14), neoliberal technologies of performativity, measurement, and audit appear to be constantly shaping new forms of academic subjects, trying to ensure 'stable uniform entities' that can be continuously compared to each other and evaluated. The origins of the reforms and changes taking place in universities, however, remain often unclear while operating based on the self-control which also means that the neoliberal discourses and policies might easily become accepted and enacted by people affected by the reforms. Fairclough (2001a) explains this acceptance by the concept of 'inculcation' that reflects the ways 'people (are) coming to "own" discourses' and to position themselves in relation to these discourses. Interestingly, from the sample of 16 academics there was only one interviewee (P1, MVLS, >14 years) who tended to speak in terms of neoliberal discourses by seeing managerialist practices and the audit culture as being beneficial for the university and the academic work; their interview included phrases such as 'I think it [assessment] has become much more professional' and 'I think we have a very rigid approach to quality assurance in assessment [in the particular department]' (P1, MVLS, >14 years) along with other similar statements.

It was also evident that the other interviewed academics tended to be rather unhappy about the ways assessment regulations govern and control them, and their discourses tended to reflect struggle with the processes that aim to shape academic work and the ways of being an academic subject. This confrontation with the neoliberal policies in the area of assessment was often reflected in the oppositional use of the words such as 'they' and 'the university' that were seen being responsible for governing assessment practices and academic work. This oppositional perspective tends to confirm Sadler's (2011) argument that tensions exist between academics, who see assessment being their responsibility and expect no external interference, and administrators, who regard it as their duty to monitor and regulate academic standards. For example, Senior Lecturer 1 (A, 16 years) used the oppositional terms 'they' and 'us' when speaking about management: 'they don't trust us...they have very little understanding of what goes on at the coalface'. There were also occasions where the university as an institution was ascribed agency and given the characteristics of a human agent such as having needs and emotions:

the University needs to assess in order to provide a degree result at the end of the day (L1, A, 9 years);

the University is terribly scared by plagiarism and sees exams a sort of safe thing where plagiarism isn't possible (SL1, A, 16 years).

While the oppositional relationship between 'they' and 'us' tends to reflect the possible struggle that academics express against accepting the neoliberalisation of academic work, this ascription of needs and emotions to the university as an agent still raises a question of who do these feelings actually belong to. It might be the case that the feeling of being 'terribly scared by plagiarism' (SL1, A, 16 years) belongs to the academics themselves as pressurised academic subjects who are increasingly subjectified by the technologies such as assessment. As the performance orientation, standards and criteria all function together 'as a kind of panoptical tower', making subjects 'watchdogs' of their own and others doings (Engebretsen et al 2012, p. 408, p. 414), academics might become adaptive to the 'programmatic ambitions of government' (Davies & Bansel, 2010, p. 9). Perhaps the aspects of the wider adaptation and coming to own the neoliberal discourses can be reflected in an unconscious process where academics ascribe their own agency and fears to the abstract agents such as the university. So it might be the case that the struggle that is currently still evident in the discourses of the interviewed academics - the oppositional 'they' and 'us' - will result in the 'inculcation' (Fairclough, 2001a) of neoliberal ways of thinking and functioning, as it becomes beneficial for oneself as an academic subject. As part of this educational reality that increasingly shapes academic subjectivities to be excellent, efficient and manageable, Ball (2013, p. 139) argues that individuals in neoliberal environments start voluntarily taking responsibility for working harder, faster and better as it has become a part of their sense of personal worth and their estimation of the worth of others. The aspects of acceptance and self-governance tend to confirm the dual nature of a neoliberal mode of government in which both the idea of scrutiny and free will tend to operate together.

The new ideal academic subjectivity tends to reflect being an efficient, scrutinised and transparent assessor. It would be premature to argue that being transparent, scrutinised and efficient is completely negative and that academics should not be governed by regulations when designing and practicing assessment; there are obviously advantages for balancing disciplinary power that exists between assessors and assessed in order to avoid putting

students 'under the thumb of a professor who abuses his authority' (Foucault, 1984, p. 299). However, it is important to notice the ways assessment technologies are making academics feel being constrained and controlled by the neoliberal reforms, shaping them also as being pressurised and oppositional academic subjects. Most of the interviewed academics tended to feel being pressurised, disengaged with policy developments and oppositional to management. Senior Lecturer 1 (A, 16 years) reflected how academics see themselves being positioned in the neoliberal university settings:

Yes, we disagree and we are not listen to. The changes in regulations are posed on us and there is nothing we can do about it, and we get told that at various different levels. (SL1, A, 16 years)

Interestingly, one of the most visible areas of threat to academic subjectivities, as described by the interviewed academics, tends to be related to their teaching roles. The participants, especially the university teachers regardless of their disciplinary backgrounds, often explained that teaching has been devalued and given a secondary importance compared to research roles in their university settings. For example, University Teacher 4 (Soc Sci, 16 years) and University Teacher 5 (MVLS, 17 years) critiqued recognition of the university teachers but also the lack of support system that is available to them:

the idea of teaching is so umm isn't given the same esteem I think as research (UT4, Soc Sci, 16 years);

the university teachers, I'll be honest with you, aren't as well supported in the University as lecturers are, [...] the route for promotion is not easy for university teachers (UT5, MVLS, 17 years).

It is important to note that these experiences of devaluation in terms of teaching roles might be related to the profile of this particular University as a Russell Group university that positions itself as 'a community of world-leading researchers' or as 'one of the world's great broad-based research-intensive universities'. However and perhaps most likely, it might demonstrate how the dominant discourses of neoliberalism and neoliberal technologies of government have started to subjectify academics as rather researchers than teachers. The performativity - 'a powerful and insidious policy technology' (Ball, 2012, p. 19) - tends to set increasing targets in relation to research outputs, for example, that appear to be shaping what it means to be a successful academic in a context that values research more than



teaching. Also, while academics in the UK are being constantly measured and compared by procedures such as the Research Excellence Framework, but also Teaching Excellence Awards and National Student Survey, they are expected to take part in the measurement culture by assessing and monitoring student performance while still demonstrating the effectiveness of their own teaching practices with respect to students' achievement.

I have tried to draw attention to several, often blurry, aspects that appear to characterise a changing nature of academic work and subjectivities. The analysed discourses tend to confirm that the neoliberal governmentality shapes and reforms the nature of academic work and the subjectivities of those who assess; it tends to favour higher efficiency, transparency and scrutinisation, while academics themselves feel being increasingly pressurised and oppositional. Davies and Bansel (2010, p. 7) argue that academic work as it is currently going through a transition might become more and more homogeneous, academics are supposed to teach the same way, to apply for the same funding opportunities and to collaborate with private sector in order to fit oneself to the 'template of best practice as this is defined by the management'. Even if academics become more 'user-friendly' in neoliberal terms (Ball, 2000, p. 10), perhaps also increasingly governable, they are and will be highly visible and vulnerable in higher education contexts that prioritises homogeneity (Davies & Bansel, 2010).

### **Tracing the academics' practices of freedom**

While the structural changes in higher education and the policy context of assessment were explained as being problematic and disinvolvement in neoliberal reforms was characteristic to discourses of the interviewed academics, there was very little evidence of any major type of overt resistance towards the neoliberal technologies of government. It would be naive to argue that there are no 'practices of freedom' (Foucault, 1984) among the academics: rather, the oppositional relationships with management but also the ideas participants noted about manoeuvring within the regulatory context and flexing the rules might be the way to understand how academics respond to neoliberal changes and how they try to protect and form themselves as academic subjects.

Interestingly, interviewees often described assessment as a relatively free and flexible process in their practice: accounts were made such as 'I actually feel I have quite a lot of flexibility' (UT1, Soc Sci, 1 year) and 'I don't feel huge pressures in institutional terms of what we can and can't do in assessment' (SL3, Soc Sci, >10 years). However, these arguments were accompanied by additional explanation that gave a more nuanced perspective. University Teacher 1 (UT1, Soc Sci, 1 year), for example, spoke about his freedom in assessment as compared to his previous experiences as a school teacher having to follow the requirements of the Scottish Qualifications Authority. This person's sense of freedom was therefore relative to the strictures in their previous work. Senior Lecturer 3, however, spoke about freedom in relation to their readiness to flex the regulations: 'I think I sometimes try to advise staff to think about writing assessment in such a way in those documents that there is a relative amount of flexibility in them' (SL3, Soc Sci, >10 years). Further phrases such as 'flexing the rules' (L1, A, 9 years), 'semi-ignore', and 'tweak' (SL1, A, 16 years) were frequent when speaking about assessment regulations. This also means that manoeuvring within the policy context that is often a hidden and perhaps underestimated process in academia, it seems to be a common practice of freedom and a form of resistance that academics demonstrate in order to shape their own work as academics and assessors.

Another option that was characterising some of the interviewees was related to distancing oneself from the regulatory context. For instance, University Teacher 6 explained how their role as a university teacher does not require them to be concerned about the regulations:

Well, I am not an Assessment Officer, so I actually don't need to worry too much about the regulations because there is an Assessment Officer for each of the courses I am involved in. Emm and they basically guide me in what I'm able to do and what I'm not able to do. Emm so I wouldn't say that I have a huge of understanding of all of the regulations but then my job I don't think requires me to have that understanding at the moment. (UT6, MVLS, 2 years)

Even if the explored discourses did not demonstrate active resistance, the courage to take the risks and tell the truth as Foucault (1983) argues when addressing the ancient technique of *parrhesia*, there seemed to be elements of manoeuvring and avoidance as forms of practices of freedom and the techniques of the self in the analysed discourses. It might confirm Foucault's arguments related to the complexities around the techniques of the self,

the ways it exceeds the idea of liberation from the structural domination (Foucault, 1984), and the effort and courage it requires from a subject in relation to knowing oneself and having a relationship with others (Foucault, 2010). So the active resistance might require a readiness to do 'extensive work by the self on the self' (Foucault, 1984, p. 286), but also to accept the possible consequences such as even a dismissal. Ball and Olmedo (2013, p. 93) argue that the processes of resistance in neoliberal contexts include an element of resisting one's own practices: 'confronting oneself at the centre our discomforts'. While the highly recognisable forms of resistance such as an exceptional proposal 'we have to start a revolution' by Lecturer 4 (Soc Sci, 4 years) are not employed in practice, the ideas related to manoeuvring within the neoliberal policies and technologies deserve major attention and future research in order to gain better understanding of the ways academics respond to and react against the neoliberalisation of higher education and the processes such as assessment.

The other important aspect that might help trace the forms of resistance as evident in the analysed discourses is related to Fairclough's focus on the use of a passive voice. Passive sentencing along with the words such as 'they' and 'the university' (as analysed in previous section) might provide a further explanation for the lack of overt resistance. By applying a passive voice, management is portrayed as something hidden that functions without concrete agents but that is ultimately responsible for the reforms and actions. For example, Senior Lecturer 2 referred to a top-down decision making in the university by using a passive voice: 'I'm required to give so much more information at the beginning of the semester or beginning of the year than I ever had to do before' (SL2, Sci E, 20 years). Similarly, Senior Lecturer 1 (A, 16 years) argued that 'everything is scrutinised much harder', 'more reflection is forced on us' and 'different things been thrown at us' without referring to any particular agents being responsible. As most of the assessment policies and reforms were described as something unclear without visible subjects responsible for them, it might explain why any practices of freedom resulting from disquiet over the changes have been expressed in covert forms. It might be difficult to express one's resistance if it is not completely clear who and what to resist, especially if academics might have to resist their own internalised understandings in relation to themselves and their work in neoliberal university. This is also what seems to make neoliberal rationality and functioning complex and dangerous –

‘neoliberalism gets into our minds and our souls, into the ways in which we think about what we do, and into our social relations with others’ (Ball, 2012, p. 18). As all practice exists in ‘a certain regime of rationality’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 230), neoliberalism seems to have become a new form of rationality that not only increases the scrutiny paid to academic practices such as assessment but is something that transforms the fundamental purposes of university and academic work. It is thereby also increasingly difficult to resist and change. It is something that ‘governs without governing’ (Read, 2009, p. 29) by creating regulations but also an illusion of freedom and a responsibility for one’s success. The location of power has shifted, therefore; while the disciplinary panopticon was based on the external control, governmentality represents power relations that are very much decentralised and founded on self-control (Engebretsen, et al, 2012) affecting the work related practices but also the practices of freedom and resistance in academia. Diffused power relations also make assessment, as a technology of government, differ from our traditional understanding of assessment as a disciplinary technology in which an academic tends to have control over a student as ‘a docile body’ (Foucault 1975, p. 136).

### **Concluding thoughts**

In terms of the University, (it) is a funny place I think, in terms of its own identity. I think it’s kind of an ancient university, it’s proud of that, and it’s part of the Russell group, so it’s very proud of that. But those things also bring with them pressures, to be particular things, and I sometimes worry that the University is so keen on projecting a kind a particular image to those groupings but it maybe loses what is it really wants to do itself. (SL3, Soc Sci, >10 years)

I am aware that this research study draws on a sample of just 16 academics that cannot be seen representative of wider perceptions of assessment technologies in higher education. However, I believe that this paper might contribute to academic discussion about the ways in which neoliberal technologies in universities attempt to govern academic practice and to shape the academic subjectivities. Obviously, the University in focus is not the only rapidly changing educational environment, but this small-scale study might provide food for thought to academics from other pressurised university contexts in the United Kingdom and internationally. The academic discourses analysed as part of this research demonstrate

struggles that academics experience in relation to neoliberal technologies of government. Assessment was also explained in relation to the technologies that are characteristic to the neoliberal mode of government such as quality assurance, managerialism, accountability and performativity. The participants related their frustrations with assessment regulation and reforms, but their discussions attested to a variety of covert rather than overt practices of freedom to the new ways of reasoning and functioning. Based on this research, the practices of freedom that help academics to cope with assessment technologies are often related to hidden but vital processes such as manoeuvring within the policy contexts and flexing the regulations as much as it is possible.

Foucault's (1984, 1997) theorisation of subjectivity suggests the possibility of developing the techniques of the self, practices and strategies that enable academics to free themselves from becoming the pressurised and frustrated subjects that the neoliberal 'entrepreneurial university' can produce. However, the techniques of the self require a readiness to 'risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human' (Butler, 2005, p. 136). It seems to be safer for any subject to adapt to the neoliberal policy developments than to enter a struggle that causes uncertainty about oneself and one's place in a changing higher education environment. Using a Foucauldian theoretical framework leads me to suggest that the power affecting academics in a new type of university is fluid and difficult to track – 'at once visible and invisible, present and hidden, ubiquitous' (Foucault & Deleuze, 1977, p. 213). This seems to be especially characteristic to neoliberalism and its technologies of government that encourage people to govern themselves (Hamann, 2009), creating an illusion of freedom and self-control that diffuses the origins of neoliberal assessment reform and often hinders the possibilities for overt forms of resistance.

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